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VA CIO selected to determine cause of shuttle diaster

by Melissa Withrow, Air Vehicles Directorate

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AIR FORCE BASE, Ohio — Clare Paul, Air Force Research Laboratory's Air Vehicles Directorate, played a part in the August release of the report that named probable cause of the Space Shuttle Columbia tragedy earlier this year. He was called upon for his expertise in developing a cause for the accident.

Paul left home in March of this year, thinking he would be gone for two weeks. However, those weeks expanded into three months spent in Houston, Texas and Washington D.C., away from his wife and three children.

Despite the unexpected call to duty and the length of time apart, Paul's family was very supportive, even when they had to put off a long planned vacation. "Right out of the gate, my wife said, 'You have to do it,'" Paul said . "She never complained once even though we have three kids, and she works outside of the home."

Paul said this assignment "gave me a sense of the sacrifice required by military families when a family member deploys. I never really appreciated that before."

As the AFRL/VA's Chief Information Officer, Paul oversees the directorate's information technology functions. Previously, he was the lead engineer in the office that oversees research and development investment for the Air Force's aging fleet. It was his experience in this area of aircraft "aging" that caused the space shuttle investigation board to seek his assistance. Paul said being a part of the investigation was a "great experience for all the wrong reasons." The Columbia accident was tragic, but he was able to work with many "extraordinary" people—leaders in their fields of safety, science, engineering and management.

Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander, Atlantic and Commander in Chief of the U.S. Joint Forces Command, Admiral Hal Gehman headed the board, which consisted of 12 leaders in the fields of science, safety, and mishap investigation as well as support personnel like Paul. Gehman was previously co-chairman of the Department of Defense review of the terrorist attack on the USS Cole in October 2000.

Paul served under board member Maj. Gen. John Barry with two other engineers as a part of group entitled "Management and Treatment of Materials." They examined the material condition of the Columbia including the external tank foam, reinforced carbon-carbon wing leading edge, and the heat resistant tile.

Every day, the group met and worked long hours. It was a very intense, emotionally and mentally taxing environment. Paul said the situation eventually took a toll on some of his colleagues and himself, but he would "look at the picture of the astronauts hanging on the wall, recalibrate, and move on." Paul also drew strength from seeing the efforts of NASA's shuttle program personnel working in parallel with the investigation board. "They worked at least as hard as we did," Paul said. They knew the astronauts personally and were driven to find out what happened to their colleagues and friends and how to stop it from happening in the future.

Volumes of the board's report will continue to be released through the end of the year. The report contains a list of findings including the probable cause of the mishap, reasons the mishap occurred, as well as recommendations for change and future flight requirements. The first volume of this report has been released to the public. @